

now, the daughtering magic to recall
across two coffee-mugs the clever Young
Socialist whose views would coincide
with mine. I didn't know that she had died.
Not talking much, while weighted sky pressed down,
we climbed the back road's bosom to the all-
night diner doubling as a bus depot.
I brushed my new friend's cool cheek with my own,
and caught the southbound bus from Montreal.
I counted boarded-up racetrack motel
after motel. I couldn't read. I tried
to sleep. I didn't know that she had died.
Hours later, outside Port Authority,
rained on, I zipped and hooded an obscure
ache from my right temple down my shoulder.
Anonymous in the mid-afternoon
crowds, I'd walk, to stretch, I thought, downtown.
I rode on the female wave, typically
into Macy's (where forty-five years
past, qualified by her new M.A.
in Chemistry, she'd sold Fine Lingerie),
to browse in Fall Sale bargains for my child,
aged six, size eight, hung brilliantly or piled
like autumn foliage I'd missed somehow,
and knew what I officially didn't know
and put the bright thing down, scalded with tears.

PART OF A TRUE STORY

for Margaret Delany

"We dress UP!"—Ntozake Shange

My dear Mrs. Bloomer:

The exigencies
of my life demand rational costume.
I noticed recently upon perusal
of a number of your interesting
journal, *The Lily*, that your radical
bifurcate garment for gentlewomen
is beyond suggestion; not to mince words,
for sale.

My people, Mrs. Bloomer, are
as well, south of the District, and until
the last and least of us no longer is
chattel, this woman must be radical
to be rational. A woman of color
is gentle as yourself, until provoked.
I have been, since the age of six.

When I,
aged twenty-some, returned to the scene
of my truncated childhood, with the goal
—which I achieved—of bringing forth my mother
and my father from bondage, as I had
my brothers, many of my sisters and
brothers, I was obliged, for my safety
and theirs, to come to them in male attire.
(Does *attire* have gender?) I cannot pass
as other than I am in one respect;
nor would I wish to. It was curious
passing that other way, where I had passed
before: "This gal can haul as heavy a
load as three men or a mule," et cetera.
A black man is only marginally
more anonymous on a Southern road

than a black woman. Dare I confess, I
liked that marginal anonymity?
Crop-headed in a neutral suit of clothes,
I sat, a stranger at my mother's table,
bearing good news she could not bear to hear
who bore me, till I bared myself as well,
scarred as I was, to loving scrutiny.
Later, I also bore the scrutiny
of the spouse whom I had reluctantly
left; who, free, had forbidden me to go
to freedom. Newly wived, he did not know
me at all, either as woman, or as
myself. It's a peculiar thing: to pass
easily, anonymously, from one
life, or mode of life, to another: done
with a forked suit? Night, starvation, a gun
to scare stragglers to courage, sleep in snow
or straw or not at all are what I know
as passage-rites. I do what I can,
but I do not wish to be thought a man
again.

Tonight, four hundred human souls,
still embodied, disembodaged, lie wakeful
or sleep in this rough but hospitable
hospice, this time, taken across water
to free land. You know the name I am called.
The straits do not. We cross them nonetheless.
I have another name now: General;
a task I had first as a nursling: Nurse.
We intend to bring out four hundred more.
I wish to be there. It is efficacious
that I be there. I must be recognized
though: black, female, and old, or nearly old.
Still, I am of scant use immobilized.
I wish to be relieved of the woolen gown
whose waterlogged skirts and underskirts hold
me so, as well as the Confederate
Army would wish. I was nearly drowned.
Thus, Mrs. Bloomer, my request. Disguise

is not wished, or called for. Compromise,
though unaccustomed, is appropriate
on this occasion. So is the connection
of our aims. I entertain reflection
that, free and black, I am still disfranchised,
female; a condition I first realized
espoused: bondwoman and freedman, we
embodied it. I transcend limitation.
I am a black woman, whose education
was late and little: necessity
of adulthood vowed to emancipation
of my people; the larger limitation
imposed by childhood spent in servitude,
leave me comparatively unlettered.
You will receive this missive, dictated
by me to my adjutant, from her
hand, to which I pray you will deliver
the costume I desire.

Awaiting your
kind reply, I remain,

Yours faithfully,

Harriet Tubman United States Army
Medical Division Port Royal Island

Port Royal Island was captured from the Confederacy by the Union Army in 1861, and became a haven for escaped slaves. Harriet Tubman, then aged about forty-one, and the most successful—and hunted—conductor on the Underground Railroad, was sent there by the governor of Massachusetts in 1862. She served as an Army scout, and as a nurse and herbal healer in the field hospital established for the freed slaves and wounded soldiers. In 1863 she led a detachment of the Second South Carolina Volunteers, a company composed of black soldiers under the command of Colonel James Montgomery, in a raid up the Combahee River, with the objectives of destroying the torpedoes with which the Confederate Army had mined the river, and of

liberating as many slaves from the coastal farms as could be transported to Port Royal on the gunboats. More than eight hundred were freed. Harriet Tubman thus added the sobriquet "General" to the name of Moses, by which even her commanding officer addressed her.

Shortly afterwards, Tubman, who had never learned to read and write, dictated a letter to Boston, ordering a Bloomer suit, because long skirts were a handicap on such a campaign.

Amelia Bloomer, feminist, abolitionist, and originator of the costume which bore her name, was also editor of *The Lily*, a periodical advocating women's rights.

I'd like to express my gratitude to Ann Petry for her biography of Harriet Tubman; its concise information fueled my imagination.

A CHAPLET FOR JUDITH LANDRY

Dear Judith: In sincerest gratitude,
here is the bread-and-butter gift requested.
I wouldn't want our friendship to be tested
because I didn't sit down and get at it. "Rude
and slovenly, with a bad attitude,"
you'd say; although there might be worse things listed
against me if my offering consisted
of cliché justified by platitude.
I'm writing to you from an estuarial
island, where deer graze, pigs rampage, loons sing;
land
marsh-bottomed, oyster-bedded, territorial
range of wild horses, freed pets' progeny.
But still I close my eyes and think of England:
where else could we dig into Kedgerree?

Where else could we dig into Kedgerree
with a prolific writer who'd just been
presented, after sherry, to the Queen?
(Next time they meet, she'll be a C.B.E.)
Two raw colonials, my girl and me
quivered respectfully, thrilled to the bone.
That's why we put on everything we owned,
although it was a sultry fifty-three
indoors. To sit by the electric fire,
stroking enchanting Rock-cake, gone quite flat
(sign of advanced achievement in a cat),
and sip Frascati—I could not desire
more! While our natterings didn't dislodge
from the kittens! the kittens! enraptured Squodge.

From the kittens! the kittens! enraptured Squodge
could only be occasionally pried.

(Say, if a Hamley's van pulled up outside,
sent by the Queen, *pour rendre ses hommages*.)

I'm sorry if we left a grubby hodge-
podge of Lego, socks and tracts beside
your easy-chair. We're sloppy, but we tried
to be acceptably contained and *sages*.

I liked the Oriental rugs beneath
and upon the table where we ate,
watching daffodils bloom in the teeth
of London bluster beyond French windows.

You liked loud Iva who resists repose.

I liked tall Lurky who stays up too late.

I liked tall Lurky who stays up too late,
although I missed the threatened saxophone
rehearsal. Living, equals, with your grown
daughter, you enlighten me and my eight-
year-old, who've witnessed pairs wasting with hate-
ful wrangling, while we hug and spar our own
infatuation. You were kind to loan
me your featherbed. Under its weight,
I slept like a ploughman with my socks on.
Mornings we drank hot coffee-milk from bowls.
The Saturday it rained, we vetoed Kew
and Herded Iva, via the Number 2
to look, with Bonnard (recognition shocks) on
interiors domestic as our souls.

Interiors domestic as our souls,
salvaged like postcards of congenial places:
frayed armchairs framing animated faces,
the two-bar fire with fake electric coals.
The kamikaze boys'-club that controls
just the survival of the human race is
excluded temporarily. What grace is
implicit in our customary roles
—confidante, chatelaine, cook, hostess, mother—
when, our own women, we have latitude
to choose them and enact them for each other.
Our homes very infrequently are castles.
Having shared yours, we'll pledge ourselves your
vassals,
dear Judith, in sincerest gratitude.

SWORD

for Toi Derricotte

This golden vengeance is one of those red
niggers like her grandfather who said
of me, "Her people are just off the boat."
He might have said, just off the cattle cars.
Here she is three, bangs her construction boot
against the van she's perched on. He is in lace,
held by a darker nurse, sixty-six years
earlier. Their twice-bright blade of face
astonishes, doubled, between imp ears
the same red-gold (his lock's glassed) curls around.
When she was born he was long darkened: dead
before he tried her honed red-gold, hybrid
of six million dead off the cattle cars,
just off the slave boats, fifteen million drowned.

INHERITANCES

Iva asks me for stories of her father's family. I learned them second-hand —not even a Christian, and not black. I think of a reflective membrane: classes, mirrored, meld. She starts with slavery. The eight-year-old hunkered in the old man's

barrel-staves to hide when the blue horseman (she breathed in horse) leaned toward her grandfather to shout, "Old man, you're free!" While slavery had slipped, a wristlet from the writing-hand of the bisque-beige girl enrolled in Classes for Young Ladies, in Paris, where her black

mother was not. Ledgers were in the black; the permeated membrane not the man, else childless, who exercised three classes' prerogatives (landed, white, male) to father twice the child who, by his power in hand, was bred to, and released from, slavery.

Iva asks, "Were your parents *for* slavery? Were *they* slaves? I know they weren't black." She puts her suntanned hand against my hand, compares. "Does 'manumit' mean, just a man could make slaves free?" I tell her, my father spoke German in his West Bronx first-grade classes;

my mother worked at Macy's, took night classes
at Hunter, read about Wage Slavery
and Profits in the kitchen, where her father
waited for her to make his breakfast. Black
dresses were required for work. A man
—Jewish, of course—would take her life in hand.

I don't wear any rings on my left hand.
Two copies of notes home from Iva's classes
are sent. Her father lives with a white man,
writes science-fiction novels: slavery
on far worlds, often, though the slaves aren't black.
She says, "Dad's roommate," or "My other father."

I wouldn't say to a black friend that class is
(in its erasures) slavery. I hand
down little to emancipate my father.

THE ROBBER WOMAN

*"Listen," said the Robber Girl
to Gerda, "you see that all the
robbers are gone. Only my
mother is left and she will
soon fall asleep. Then I shall
do something for you."*

H. C. Andersen: The Snow Queen

I cuffed you into shape. I molded you
in my swelling matrix, pushed you out
into the world. I push you into the world
daily, and the labor is the same:
very like pain, unless I work at it.

As long as I sleep among thieves
you are safe in the upper air.

You kicked me from the inside long enough
when I bulged with you. I put my elbows
on what must have been your pointed butt
and watched your bony angles flying out.
I picked my load up when I'd caught my breath.

As long as I sleep among thieves
you are safe in the upper air.

I hug you and I slap you. I kiss you
and I curse you. I get your booted foot
on my scarred shins. I can still throw you down
and pick you up. Most of the time, it's play.
You knocked my knife-hand and my breath out today.

As long as I sleep among thieves
you are safe in the upper air.

You cheered when your head reached my belt-buckle.
Now I can't peer into your matted hair.
You lean against me. I can rest my chin
on your head, smelling unwashed child, while you
play-punch my breasts the way you always did.

As long as I sleep among thieves
you are safe in the upper air.

I always feel you in my hands, like clay.
You're oven-ready now. When you are baked
in the kiln of the world, my hands could break
what they made as accidentally
as easily as anybody's hands.

As long as I sleep among thieves
you are safe in the upper air.

You've started. I've scrubbed away your first blood.
My breasts are hard as when we nursed. I'm due.
You chose your friend; you took her for yourself
up into that cat-hideout where you sleep.
I hardly wonder what you talk about.

*You are safe in the upper air
to believe what a child believes:
no blow that you receive
will ever leave a scar
but the impatient care-
less clout your mother gives;
certain that if you live
another hundred years
you never will forgive
a grain of malice there.
No harm ascends the stairs
unless your mother leaves
the bedroom door ajar.
The heavy step that weaves
its twist of fear in rev-*

*eries of empowered love
is—do you doubt it—hers.
The clean wind strips the eaves.
You stretch to what you will dare.
No one will know what you are
as long as I sleep among thieves.*

THE LITTLE ROBBER GIRL CONSIDERS THE WIDE WORLD

Far from the steamy parlors of the north,
aspiring rooftrees soar above the hearth.
Although they splay like courtiers' coolers, swords
of undergrowth clank in the wind like swords,

like that cloisonné fencing-master's skewer
mounted to proffer towels near the shower.
Whatever I can do, I'm going to do it,
with no one to forbid it or allow it.

I washed myself and washed myself. Blue tile
speculated on the ring I stole
while mispronouncing toasts with the entire
retinue of a People's Ambassador

who pinched my arm and reeled out such a line!
It's harder work than huddling in the cold.
I'm tired of eating all my meals alone,
glimpsing myself in silver like a child.

I can salvage without being foolish:
whatever tales her scraggly carrion birds
hear from my mother as she rocks and broods,
only my ankles and my wrists are girlish.

They said I'd bake to blazes, but they lied.
I think I never will be warm enough.
The noon sun satisfies my lizard blood.
I wish I hadn't given her my knife

because she didn't cry though I could bruise
her with my thumb. She doesn't know I loathe
her drool about an ice boy and a rose.
It was like stroking a blacksnake: too smooth.

She'd tell me better secrets if I pried.
Sooner or later, I'd get tired of bossing
her around. If I could tweak and prod
her to fight back, that would be appetizing—

except she went away early this morning,
saddle-strapped like a piglet on a spit.
(I can't ride horses well yet, but I'm learning.)
Beyond the egret's marsh, I found a spot . . .

Oh, I can't even make up a good story.
I stomp around the footpath, getting bitten
by gnats and kicking rocks and feeling rotten.
I'm bored, is all: it isn't so mysteri-

ous. It's hours and hours and hours till dinner.
I wish I had my knife. I bet she'll drop
it and lose it, or give it to that drip
and never use it for herself. Piss on her!

BALLAD OF LADIES LOST AND FOUND

for Julia Alvarez

Where are the women who, *entre deux guerres*,
came out on college-graduation trips,
came to New York on football scholarships,
came to town meeting in a decorous pair?
Where are the expatriate *salonnières*,
the gym teacher, the math-department head?
Do nieces follow where their odd aunts led?
The elephants die off in Cagnes-sur-Mer.
H.D., whose "nature was bisexual,"
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Where are the single-combat champions:
the Chevalier d'Eon with curled peruke,
Big Sweet who ran with Zora in the jook,
open-handed Winifred Ellerman,
Colette, who hedged her bets and always won?
Sojourner's sojourned where she need not pack
decades of whitegirl conscience on her back.
The spirit gave up Zora; she lay down
under a weed-field miles from Eatonville,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Where's Stevie, with her pleated schoolgirl dresses,
and Rosa, with her permit to wear pants?
Who snuffed Clara's *mestiza* flamboyance
and bled Frida onto her canvases?
Where are the Niggerati hostesses,
the kohl-eyed ivory poets with severe
chignons, the rebels who grew out their hair,
the bulldaggers with marcelled processes?
Conglomerates co-opted Sugar Hill,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Anne Hutchinson, called witch, termagant, whore,
fell to the long knives, having tricked the noose.
Carolina Mariá de Jesús'
tale from the slagheaps of the landless poor
ended on a straw mat on a dirt floor.
In action thirteen years after fifteen
in prison, Eleanor of Aquitaine
accomplished half of Europe and fourscore
anniversaries for good or ill,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Has Ida B. persuaded Susan B.
to pool resources for a joint campaign?
(Two Harriets act a pageant by Lorraine,
cheered by the butch drunk on the IRT
who used to watch me watch her watching me;
we've notes by Angelina Grimké Weld
for choral settings drawn from the *Compiled
Poems* of Angelina Weld Grimké.)
There's no such tense as Past Conditional,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Who was Sappho's protégée, and when did
we lose Hrotsvitha, dramaturge and nun?
What did bibulous Suzanne Valadon
think about Artemisia, who tended
to make a life-size murderess look splendid?
Where's Aphra, fond of dalliance and the pun?
Where's Jane, who didn't indulge in either one?
Whoever knows how Ende, Pintrix, ended
is not teaching Art History at Yale,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Is Beruliah upstairs behind the curtain
debating Juana Inés de la Cruz?
Where's *savante* Anabella, Augusta-Goose,
Fanny, Maude, Lidian, Freda and Caitlin,
"without whom this could never have been written"?

Louisa who wrote, scrimped, saved, sewed, and
nursed,
Malinche, who's, like all translators, cursed,
Bessie, whose voice was hemp and steel and satin,
outside a segregated hospital,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Where's Amy, who kept Ada in cigars
and love, requited, both country and courtly,
although quinquagenarian and portly?
Where's Emily? It's very still upstairs.
Where's Billie, whose strange fruit ripened in bars?
Where's the street-scavenging Little Sparrow?
Too poor, too mean, too weird, too wide, too narrow:
Marie Curie, examining her scars,
was not particularly beautiful;
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Who was the grandmother of Frankenstein?
The Vindicatrix of the Rights of Woman.
Madame de Sévigné said prayers to summon
the postman just as eloquent as mine,
though my Madame de Grignan's only nine.
But Mary Wollstonecraft had never known
that daughter, nor did Paula Modersohn.
The three-day infants blinked in the sunshine.
The mothers turned their faces to the wall;
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

Tomorrow night the harvest moon will wane
that's floodlighting the silhouetted wood.
Make your own footnotes; it will do you good.
Emeritae have nothing to explain.
She wasn't very old, or really plain—
my age exactly, volumes incomplete.
"The life, the life, will it never be sweet?"
She wrote it once; I quote it once again
midlife at midnight when the moon is full

and I can almost hear the warning bell
offshore, sounding through starlight like a stain
on waves that heaved over what she began
and truncated a woman's chronicle,
and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.

UNCOLLECTED POEMS 1980–1990

CORONA

for Kim Vaeth

You're flying back, weighted with half the books
that piled the work-table and the night-table.
They bulk your rucksack. You gum on a label,
consign it, while our eyes condense three weeks'
talk, silence, touch: relief, regret. It looks
like complicity. Friends, with a third friend,
I put my hand on your nape; you put your hand
in my back pocket. I kiss, first, both cheeks,
surprise you on your mouth. Your flight's called. I
watch you, helmed with departure, stubborn, brave
in cream shirt, lilac trousers, suede shoes, tie
the next tan, turn, glisten, go. Concave
space takes you, the cord's cut. We leave. I crave
uncomplicated quiet, and the sky.

Uncomplicated quiet, and the sky
a Marian mantle through the car window.
I think of all the things I'll never know.
"I wish I was older," the young girl said. "Why?"
"So I would know more." You and she and I
spanned twenty years among us. While you drove
serpent curves through vineyards and olive groves,
she read *The Bell Jar*, till we stopped to buy
Chianti at a *cave*, upturned the bell
to shining tulips where the garnet wine
perfumed our morning. Weight in the palm, see, smell,
taste: our three mouths contemplated fine
meditations of ancient earth, as well
considered as just measures for a line.

Considered as just measures for a line,
sound more than sense determines words I choose;
invention mutes intention. If the shoes
you bought were grey suede clogs, size thirty-nine,
if we sang passion's matins and compline,
I'm story-telling. Reading poetry
we expect truth, you said, and I agree.
Truth, in particulars, I can define.
They're brown, your oxfords, and size forty-one;
two nuns, watching over another nun
through a night of fever, could not have kept
their limbs more ordered than we did; we slept
apart, together: facile franchise, whose
unsubtle truth can blanket subtlety.

Unsubtle truth can blanket subtlety.
In the next room, you slept in our guest-friend bed.
Where I wrote, your pad sat, pen-marked. I read
that morning, what, that night, you'd thought of me.
I wished I could evaporate, could be
anywhere else. I thought "Ingratitude,"
and flinched, while Tuscan light ignored my mood.
If I fail friendship, what felicity
left? Words crystallize despite our lives, select
emblems from hesitations and suspect
feelings. I coaxed your questioning, oblique,
till words undid what they had done. We speak
our pieces: peace. Plural, and amical,
we crossed the Arno, walked beyond the wall.

We cross the Arno, walk beyond the wall
up a steep wooded hill I climbed before
with another woman, hand in hand.
Now we hold hands, too, meaning something more
and less than "sex". At the ramparts, we stand
looking down sungilt waves of clay roof-tile
tender in late light slanted, now, toward Fall.
We separate ourselves from day-trip style
tourists, though we are tourists after all.
We need a breather from the personal.
Facts permit us touch. You rest your head on
my lap while I praise Suzanne Valadon.
Fatigue relaxes to repose in your
tanned shoulders, opulent and muscular.

Tanned shoulders, opulent and muscular,
power exuberant strokes. The choppy lake
frames, then conceals, your dolphin play. You take
a deep breath and submerge, then surface, far
away, all shining. There's a rectangular
concrete slab on pillars we saw boys make
lolloping dives from. You swim to it, break
thigh-high from the water, stretch to it, are
pendant by your wet arms, straining to pull
yourself up by them, drop, splash, leap again
determined from the water, less playful
now, challenged. You fall back. After ten
tries, you heave your leg over, stand, know I've
watched. I photograph your offhand dive.

Watched, I photograph your offhand dive.
How to depict attention that surveys
ground for reflexive confidence. Delays
are legion. When I navigate, you drive
home that indecision makes you arrive
exhausted anywhere. The hand belays
the rope to you's not mine. After a day's
mileage, Motown, nineteen-sixty-five;
we sing the car the last dark miles: "You can't
hurry love." We're almost what's almost home
to me. The constellated coast invokes
those road blues I'll sing myself, revenant
on airport buses when, again alone,
I'm flying back, weighted with half the books.

ELYSIAN FIELDS

"Champs Elysées of Broadway" says the awning
of the café where, every Sunday morning,
young lawyers in old jeans ripped at the knees
do crosswords. Polyglot Lebanese
own it: they've taken on two more shopfronts
and run their banner down all three at once.
Four years ago, their sign, "Au Petit Beurre"
was so discreet, that, meeting someone there,
I'd tell her the street-corner, not the name.
They were in the right place at the right time.
Meanwhile, the poor are trying hard enough.
Outside, on Broadway, people sell their stuff
laid out on blankets, cardboard cartons, towels.
A stout matron with lacquered auburn curls
circles the viridian throw-rug
and painted plaster San Martin to hug
a thinner, darker woman, who hugs her
back volubly in Spanish—a neighbor,
I guess, and guess they still have houses.
The man with uncut, browned French paperbacks,
the man with two embroidered gypsy blouses
and three pilled pitiful pairs of plaid slacks
folded beside him on the pavement where
there was a Puerto Rican hardware store
that's been a vacant shopfront for two years
may not. There's a young couple down the block
from our corner: she's tall, gaunt, gangly, black;
he's short, quick, volatile, unshaven, white.
They set up shop dry mornings around eight.
I've seen him slap her face, jerking her thin
arm like a rag doll's—a dollar kept from him,
she moves too slow, whore, stupid bitch . . . "She's
my wife," he tells a passing man who stops
and watches. If anyone did call the cops
it would be to prevent them and their stacks

of old *Vogues* and outdated science texts
from blocking access to the "upscale bar"
where college boys get bellicose on beer.
"Leave him," would I say? Does she have keys
to an apartment, to a room, a door
to close behind her? What we meant by "poor"
when I was twenty, was a tenement
with clanking pipes and roaches; what we meant
was up six flights of grimed, piss-pungent stairs,
four babies and a baby-faced welfare
worker forbidden to say "birth control".
I was almost her, on the payroll
of New York State Employment Services
—the East 14th Street Branch, whose task it was
to send day-workers, mostly black, to clean
other people's houses. Five-fifteen
and I walked east, walked south, walked up my four
flights. Poor was a neighbor, was next door,
is still a door away. The door is mine.
Outside, the poor work Broadway in the rain.
The cappuccino drinkers watch them pass
under the awning from behind the glass.

A NOTE DOWNRIVER

Afternoon of hungover Sunday morning:
nothing worse than wine on an empty stomach
after meeting Tom for a bomb on Broadway—
done worse; known better.

I feel muggy-headed and convalescent,
barely push a pen across blue-lined paper,
stare at envelopes with another country's
stamps, and your letter.

Hilltop house, a river to take you somewhere,
sandwiches at noon with a good companion.
Summer's ghost flicked ash from the front-porch
railing,
looked up, and listened.

I would grouse and growl at you if you called me.
I have brought you camomile tea and rye bread
toast, fixed us both orange juice laced with seltzer
similar mornings.

We'll most likely live in each other's houses,
like I haunted yours last July, as long as
we hear rivers vacillate downstream. They say
"Always"; say "Never."

NEARLY A VALEDICTION

You happened to me. I was happened to
like an abandoned building by a bull-
dozer, like the van that missed my skull
happened a two-inch gash across my chin.
You were as deep down as I've ever been.
You were inside me like my pulse. A new-
born flailing toward maternal heartbeat through
the shock of cold and glare: when you were gone,
swaddled in strange air I was that alone
again, inventing life left after you.

I don't want to remember you as that
four o'clock in the morning eight months long
after you happened to me like a wrong
number at midnight that blew up the phone
bill to an astronomical unknown
quantity in a foreign currency.
The U.S. dollar dived since you happened to me.
You've grown into your skin since then; you've grown
into the space you measure with someone
you can love back without a caveat.

While I love somebody I learn to live
with through the downpulled winter days' routine
wakings and sleepings, half-and-half caffeine-
assisted mornings, laundry, stock-pots, dust-
balls in the hallway, lists instead of lust
sometimes, sometimes, instead of longing, trust
that what comes next comes after what came first.
She'll never be a story I make up.
You were the one I didn't know where to stop.
If I had blamed you, now I could forgive

you, but what made my cold hand, back in proximity to your hair, your mouth, your mind, want where it no way ought to be, defined by where it was, and was and was until the whole globed swelling liquefied and spilled through one cheek's nap, a syllable, a tear, was never blame, whatever I wished it were. You were the weather in my neighborhood. You were the epic in the episode. You were the year poised on the equinox.

HER RING

Her ring is in a safe-deposit box
with hundred-dollar bills and wills and deeds.
You used to hide my letters with the stock
certificates, unlock a room to read
those night thoughts in a vault under the bank
where we descend this noon: a painless loan
of cash from you to me, for which I thank
you, but tremble. Half as a joke, we sign
a promissory note on a looseleaf
page: odd, to see your name written with mine.
You fold that, file it in a plastic sleeve,
then rummage in the artifacts to find
and show me what you've just inherited:
your mother's knuckle-duster diamond ring,
a fossil prism in a satin bed.
You model it. I see your hand shaking.
You ask me if I want to try it on
but I won't put that diamond on my hand.
Once, I gave you a ring. You loaned me one.
What I borrowed that day has been returned.

DAYS OF 1987

for K.J.

We were coming down from the monastery
when a huge grey monk, on a squat brown donkey,
cowled and bearded, brandished his furled umbrella
to flag our Vespa.

"Storm!" in Greek, I got from his growls and gestures
(not a malediction on noon intruders).
Thunderheads piled up on the dark Aegean
cliffs, with no shelter

in the hills we'd wanted to wander over
after lunch, with oranges in your knapsack
saved for when we'd peeled back the afternoon to
nakedness, later.

As we dodged the sheepshit and potholes, sudden
gravel craters macadam never leveled,
arms around your cornflower shirt, I gripped you:
we were both freezing.

One hill village later, the road was better.
Yellow roses flapped in the wind like dishrags
on the stucco wall of a house I wished were
ours for the season.

The archaic patriarch sky behind us
threatened stockpiled weaponry. We dismounted
at the rent-a-motorbike shop in Chanía
under the first drops.

At the foot of Litanon Street, we had a
seedy furnished room just above the harbor.
All that night, the hurricane howled and pounded
against the window.

Through the wall, the *yíayía* complained and bickered
with her mumbling daughter and adolescent
grandson (who looked more like a bull than like a
Minoan gymnast).

All that night, and all through the day that followed,
trapped in bed by roaring expostulations,
we made love nine times, and we read, between us,
a thousand pages—

Durrell and Duras brought along from Paris
bookshelves only friendlier when it's raining.
We'd longed for conventual isolation.
Now we were close as

we'd get to it, stir-crazy in our two-day
underwear, until, driven out by hunger,
we ate deep-fried pigs' balls in a rank café
behind the market.

In the morning, overcast skies still darkened
Chanía, but the hurricane had abated.
Little knots of fishermen, waiters, clerks from
flooded-out shops stood

near the pier, debating the damage. Old men
swore that fifty years had gone by since they'd seen
such a storm. I think they did, with sparse Greek. We
looked at the water.

Wicker chairs and orange-peel bobbed adrift in
slime-green waves that lapped over the retaining
wall to sluice the waterfront shops and bars with
their bloat and sewage.

Dutch and German backpackers trudged outside our favorite café, waterlogged and scraggly, in among unseasonably-shawled basket-laden town matrons.

Paired monks paced the cruciform aisles inside the covered market. Up on the hill, the burly one packed up his saddlebags in the mud-pocked cobblestone courtyard.

LETTER ON JUNE 15

I didn't want a crowd. I didn't want
writers' backbiting in a restaurant.
Last night's leftover duck, some chilled Sancerre
(you've called fresh-tasting) beckoned to me more.
I crossed the Pont Sully, into an eight-
forty sunset, toward home, and whom I'd meet.
In the letter that I didn't write,
I tell you, I was meeting you tonight.
You in an envelope; you in the braille
of postmarks footnoting the morning mail.
You, bracketed from life with someone else
though part of every page is what she tells
you; not my morning clarity of bells
to matins, phoned links to life with someone else.
I met you here as if geography
were all that separated you from me,
though hand to hand and lovely mouth to mouth
magnetic north and doubly polar south
are on lost maps, the trails are overgrown.
It's warm, it's almost dark, it's half-past ten.
"I can't imagine Paris without you"
was the tear-jerker on the radio
when I began to cry in Julie's car
under the Nashville skyline where you were
the bottom line. By the time we got
to Phoenix (with bald tires and gluey hot
seat-covers) I was already halfway back
to Paris without you. In time, with luck,
anyone could imagine needing less
than all this food, these books, these clothes: excess
upholstery, distraction, dead wood, bloat.
You're what I had to learn to do without.
I did. But here you are, no farther than
the whirring of the small electric fan
we bought that summer when you had night sweats,

then a sore back, then just a cold, then doubts
that you'd blot out with morning lust against
my chest, my cunt, my mouth, as evidence
that you were present. Later, you'd deny
what you'll admit to now: the late July
three-quarter moon on shuttered bars, the meat
and vegetables, the dim glow when you lit
a candle in the chapel after Mass.
An ancient park attendant clears the grass
of kids who were imagined *jouissance*
when we conceived and miscarried our chance.
We each have whispered, written, other names.
There are more dead for whom to light small flames.
Down on the street, waiters crank up the awning
of the café *en face*. Tomorrow morning
I'll be no farther and no closer than
your walk down to the post office with Jan
along a storm-pocked tertiary road.
Word-children, we will send each other words
that measure distances we have to keep
defining. When I lay me down to sleep
you stack up your day's work-sheets on the porch
table, light up, lean back. Two silver birch
trees form a twilit arch above your head.
It's hours before you're going to go to bed.

ONE MORE CAR POEM FOR JULIE

I need transmission fluid for the brain.
The sky is a pathetic fallacy.
Even the R-cinq won't start in the rain.

How bad's the Gignac supermarket line
at five-thirty on a wet Saturday?
I need transmission fluid for the brain.

The car, nose upwind of the sodden plain,
grunts like an old sow turning in her sty.
Even the R-cinq won't start in the rain.

"We'll wait. The engine's flooded." You explain
the car's idiosyncrasies to me.
I need transmission fluid for the brain.

So do you: both on our own again,
two solitudes stall temporarily.
Even the R-cinq won't start in the rain

and she's a Tour de France-class veteran,
a tough old lady, like we hope to be.
We need transmission fluid for the brain;

she needs to let her gas tank blow-dry, then
roll downhill, nudged by three grizzled *pépés*.
Even the R-cinq won't start in the rain.

Two pounds of coffee, three bottles of wine,
a six-pack, four liters of Perrier . . .
even the R-cinq won't start in the rain:
we need transmission fluid for the brain.

QUAI SAINT-BERNARD

I take my Sunday exercise riverside,
not quite a local, not quite a transient.

Dutch houseboats, gravel barges, nose by
teenagers tanning in day-glo gym shorts.

Waves slick as seal-pelts undulate after, like
sun-dappled, ludic, sexual animals
—if you ignore the floating garbage
cast by the strollers and week-end sailors.

Three German students nap on their sleeping-bags,
back-packs and water-bottles niched next to them,
up on the slope of lawn beside the
playground, as safe as suburban puppies,

while, underneath a willow, a family:
blonde woman, man like African ebony,
her mother, almond-golden toddler,
picnic on Camembert, bread and apples.

I bring my books to sit in my favorite
spot, concrete steps that arc in a half-circle
out from the water. Sometimes, barges
pull up and tie up beside my elbow.

Shit! someone's standing inches in back of me,
with all this space . . . From vision's periphery
I just can make out it's a woman,
so I relax. Then she walks around me

on down the quai—a derelict madwoman,
drunk, drugged, or tranced, long hair to her knees,
with bare
feet, flowered blouse and filthy trousers,
teetering there like a tightrope walker.

She pauses, kneels down, flinging her copious
brown, half-soaked hair, a blindfold, in front of her
so she can't see where she is going
inches away from the churning water.

Who stops her, leads her farther away from the
edge, even asks her what she was doing there?

I don't, although she'd come so close her
serpentine shadow fell on my notebook.

She halts, and sways in front of a sunbathing
young man engrossed in reading a paperback.

We others watch her staring at him,
grateful we aren't the one she's chosen.

No crisis: she traverses the half-circle
stone steps, away from water and audience,
sits in the dust behind a basalt
statue, lies down like exhausted dogs do.

So I dismiss her, turn back away from her.
So does the almost-naked man opposite.

We read, relieved of ever knowing
even what language she might have spoken.

LETTER TO A WOUND

We never had a cabin in the woods.
We never had a yard, a dog, a child.
We never lived in the same neighborhood.
We never ate, half-naked, on a tiled
terrace over the vineyards in Languedoc,
or drank milkshakes on the towelled front seat
of that fifth-hand Chevy pickup truck
whose gears required a clog-dance with both feet.
The girl turned round, got older, shut the door
behind her. Twenty-five gone; forty-four
came and went: you're almost thirty; I'm
forty-six. There were other years instead
of all the hours and days we never had.
Mostly, what we never had was time.

Mostly, what we never had was time
to learn the words and pauses each one needed,
look at a known face long enough to read it
right. When we were partners in crime,
we lived in the colloquial sublime:
the getaway jalopy, unimpeded,
swerved toward the exit ramp at breakneck speed. It
wasn't real. What was real? I am stym-
ied by that one, even now. Was I just
a casualty of your twenty-five-
year growing pains? When the cloud of lust
settled on the imaginary drive-
way, you'd left. Not: left room for discussion.
Work it out? I could have been speaking Russian.

Work it out? If I'd been speaking Russian
we couldn't have understood each other less.
"Yes" and "Not this" were different languages.
Here, I've another language, sometimes lush in
an orchard's mouth, sometimes the brisk percussion
of *citadins*. In Iva's outgrown "Guess"
jeans, by the river, watching barges pass
and gay boys clamber through the underbrush in
cache-sexes, where *bateaux-mouches* perform their deft
swerve, vanishing around l'Ile Saint-Louis,
I think of other years here: with Marie,
alone, with Iva, then with you, alone,
KJ's and my first year, along again.
I think of whom I love, and whom she left.

I think of whom I love, and whom she left.
Years back, when I ragged her about her youth,
she'd tease me that I wasn't old enough
for her. So someone else plunged in that swift
seductive current with youth set adrift.
"You'll like her. She's smart. She's got a kid. She's
tough."

(We jaywalked Astor Place.) "I think I'm in love."
"More than you were last time?" I might have laughed.
Tough, smart: I did like her. Smart, tough: she died.
Would it amuse her that a pallbearer
married the widow—or the widower?
(Shades of a British thriller, or a dyke
romance, two kinds of potboiler she liked
to read, with snacks, in bed.) I hope it would

Two read with snacks in bed. I hoped it would
be like this: daily life I can believe
in, daily. Anyone you love will leave
was what you proved to me the year you did.
So she and I, at first, were closeted
from everyone, ourselves included, grief
not yet, for either (ever) over. We've
made room for grief because it's what we had;
agree the sum of days is all our lives.
One morning, it meant more than being lovers
to walk home with her from the drycleaner,
our arms heaped up with summer slipcovers.
That night, I was meeting you for dinner.
You wore a torn black ribbon on your sleeve.

You wore a torn black ribbon on your sleeve:
your mother—the mother who adopted
you, not the other one, who left—was dead.
You wore that scrubbed composure the bereaved
wear, after a long dying: drained, relieved.
You, not alone, were going to drive upstate.
"There's a funky French place KJ and I ate
at, near there—'Yvonne's'," I wondered if
it would remind you, too, of "Fandango"
in Paris (where I'd soon be back, solo).
You'd felt safe there, those summer evenings when
we brought a notebook, and shared your good pen.
I wrote a line, you wrote a line, and then
Nadine was there, opened our chilled Meursault.

Nadine was *here*, opened our chilled Meursault
while we wrote vinous couplets. There, Yvonne
broke the cork in half for you and Jan
before she poured your wine, as if she knew.
I know an exigent tall person who
kissed my face in the February sun
that flecked Camille Claudel's bust of Rodin
beneath the gelid trees. It isn't you.
You vetoed one future: don't blur those pasts
that followed the short present you allowed
us. You write, it calmed your mourning that
somebody was right there with you at last
to drive home through the woods beside you—but
we never had a cabin in the woods.